

Beneficiary access to care

ISSUE: Is access to care a problem for beneficiaries living in rural areas? If so, where are these problems concentrated? And what are the implications of the findings on rural access to care for Medicare policy? These questions are important because rural areas of the country are believed to present more obstacles to accessing care than others, particularly due to the relatively small number of providers and long distances between providers and beneficiaries.

KEY POINTS: MedPAC's research is largely reassuring about these obstacles to care. A resounding percent of rural beneficiaries express satisfaction with the availability of providers and their travel times, although beneficiaries in the most remote areas report some problems. Overall, rural beneficiaries' greatest concern and potential barrier to care, however, appears to be the high cost of care, which may be related to limited availability and high cost of supplemental insurance.

It is unclear, based upon these findings, whether the programs designed to address the perceived problem of the availability of providers, discussed in this chapter, have been successful or if the magnitude of the barriers had been overestimated. However, the findings do suggest that policymakers should be particularly vigilant in monitoring access issues in remote rural areas. To aid policymakers in determining whether a policy response in this area is warranted, the Commission plans to research rural beneficiaries' cost-sharing responsibilities and recommends that the Secretary research rural beneficiaries participation in cost-sharing assistance programs.

ACTION: Commissioners should review this draft chapter for substance and tone and provide feedback to staff at the meeting. Staff will incorporate comments into the final draft of the chapter.

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